



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Yoga and Meditation: An Ancient Answer to Modern Day Stress

*Lisa, a 37-year-old mother of two, was racing through life, trying to juggle responsibilities at home, at work, and at her church, where she volunteered each week. One day, at her annual doctor's appointment, her doctor told her she had high blood pressure. Her busy schedule had slowly eroded her good eating habits and put an end to her regular fitness walks with friends. Now Lisa was 40 pounds overweight and facing the added dangers that accompany a high blood pressure diagnosis. She was intrigued when her doctor suggested yoga and meditation as part of her treatment.*

Lisa is not alone. Thousands of women are learning that the ancient Indian practices of yoga and meditation can provide real health benefits. Medical studies show that yoga and meditation may be helpful for those with a variety of conditions, including heart disease, asthma, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, PMS, anxiety, and stress. By stretching the body and relaxing the mind, experts say that the benefits of yoga and meditation are enormous.

"Yoga and meditation focus people," says Rachel Donnell, Community Health Nurse at Red Lake Comprehensive Health Services, which is a Red Lake Indian Reservation in Red Lake, Minnesota. "Women get so caught up in the everyday world; they have to take time to regenerate and rejuvenate." Donnell, who regularly practices yoga herself, adds, "It gives you the power to do what you want to do."

#### What is yoga?

Yoga is a system built on three main structures: exercise, breathing, and meditation. When yoga is practiced regularly, these systems are designed to work in unison and produce a clear mind and a strong body.

There are four types or "paths" of yoga: *Jnana*, the path of knowledge; *Bhakti*, the path of devotion; *Karma*, the path of action; and *Raja*, the path of self-control. For each path, there are a number of different styles of yoga practiced. *Hatha* yoga (which is actually part of *Raja* yoga) is the form most popular in the West and focuses on postures and breathing.

All forms of yoga should be thought of as a process rather than a type of exercise. In most fitness programs, for example, someone who has not been physically active may begin exercising with a goal of touching her fingers to her toes. A more avid athlete will train for months or even years to achieve her goal of completing a marathon. With yoga, by contrast, the focus is on what you are doing—specific postures (*asana*) and exercises (*pranayama*)—and how you feel while you are doing them.

### **What is meditation?**

Meditation is a part of most yoga practices. It involves concentrating on something simple—the breath, for example—to take attention away from the random thought activity that occupies the mind. Meditation allows people to slow the high speed movies that run through their heads and put them in touch with the quiet that is so often craved. A simple meditation may involve the following technique:

- Sit in a comfortable position, either in a chair or on the floor, with your back and head straight.
- Warm up with a couple of deep, cleansing breaths.
- Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
- Focus on your breath—slowly breathing in and out. If your mind wanders (which will likely happen), just bring your attention back to the breath.
- Start with a 5-10 minute meditation and work up to 15-20 minutes or more.

Studies show that regular meditation is great therapy for those recovering from surgery or an emotional trauma. Meditation has also been shown to relax the tension of the gross and subtle muscles and the autonomic nervous system and provide freedom from mental stress. There is no one, "right" way to meditate; however, here are some guidelines to help you achieve the greatest benefit:

- Meditate every day, ideally at the same time each day (most people agree morning is best).
- Designate a special place for meditation and use it only for meditation.
- While meditating, sit straight and vertical.
- Meditate before a meal (not right after one).

Hundreds of individuals and groups teach yoga and meditation. Many different techniques are taught, some more spiritual in nature and others

are mainly concerned with stress-reduction and gaining a little peace of mind. You may want to go to a couple of different classes before choosing a style that is right for you. For more information and a listing of yoga instructors by state, check out the "Yoga Site" at [www.yogasite.com](http://www.yogasite.com). The path you choose could change your life.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*